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AUTHOR Woodward, Helen
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ABSTRACT

Intended to discourage classroom reading teachers from relying on "phonics instruction" as a remedy for students' inadequate reading performance, this pamphlet presents reasons why phonics drills should not be taught at all in the classroom and offers a set of practical phonic awareness activities to help poor readers overcome reading difficulties. The pamphlet notes phonics deals with sounds rather than meaning, and that many words cannot be sounded out unless the meaning is known. It then presents seven exercises that illustrate how meaning is made during the reading process and how "sounding out letters" interferes with the meaning-making process. It then provides strategies that will enable children to use the more natural syntactic and semantic cueing systems that, in turn, will allow the grapho-phonetic cueing system to fall into place. References are attached. (NKA)

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Reading Problems:

More Phonics?

Helen Woodward

PEN 63
From the Primary English
Teaching Association

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Have you ever heard the comment, 'Joey can't cope with the class reading program. He doesn't know his sounds. He really needs to go back to the basics and learn his phonics again?' In other words — 'Give him more of the same even though it didn't work before.' Who in their right mind would go back to a doctor who kept prescribing the same medication even though it did not help? The answer is, of course, no one, but in schools similar practices are common. There are many 'Joey's' in the classrooms, but in my view phonics is definitely not the answer to their problem. In fact I believe that phonics should not be 'taught' at all. Opportunities should be given for children to learn phonics and become aware of letter-sound relationships, but phonics should definitely not be 'taught'. Here are some of the reasons why phonics would not improve Joey's reading and some ideas that would put Joey and many others like him on the road to recovery.

Two case studies

Mary

Mary was in Year 5. During the previous five years she had learnt the best set of avoidance skills I have ever experienced, but she had not learnt to read. She had produced reading-like behaviours, but her actual reading performance, both orally and silently, was apparently non-existent. Mary could pick up a minimal number of words from a text by relying on the accompanying pictures, and she knew that print was what you were supposed to read. She always had a book of reasonable difficulty on her desk. She 'read' at the expected times and, when questioned, gave answers that could be picked up from pictures or by listening to other children. If she didn't know the answer, she would say that she wasn't up to that part yet. When her lack of reading ability was eventually uncovered, she was given the Neale Reading Analysis Standardized Test, including the phonics test. This test consists of individual letters in isolation, for which the child has to supply the sounds. The test results

clearly indicated that Mary didn't know her phonics or the corresponding letter names.

The recommendation was ten minutes of phonics daily. I had the good fortune to talk with Mary at this time and discovered many interesting things that were not consistent with this diagnosis. Perhaps the most striking was that Mary knew what a dictionary was for and how to use it. She could immediately locate the section you would go to if you wanted to find 'duck', 'banana', 'zebra', 'robot' and at least ten other words. These words were given to her orally, and so she had to transfer sounds to letters before using the dictionary. It was obvious that phonics was not Mary's problem. Ten minutes of phonics a day was not what she needed. But what was?

John

John was seven years old. He was repeating Year 1 because he had been ill for some time during the previous year and was not yet showing any signs of being an emergent reader. He too was tested on a variety of standardized tests and diagnosed to be severely lacking in phonic knowledge. The recommended remediation was a daily dose of phonics and a specially designed program developed around phonic principles (the learning of individual sounds and sounding out words), so that his mother could help him at home. The program was carried out for the rest of the year, but the results showed little, if any, discernible development in John's reading. He was frustrated by his performance and did not see reading as a pleasurable activity. He was, however, content to write, always using his own set of symbols. Many of these were from the alphabet, but there was no correlation between the letters themselves and the sounds he expressed when he 'read' his story to the teacher. Why didn't John improve? Why didn't he remember the sounds he was taught? Why couldn't he read when he had had a concentrated dose of phonics? Mary, on the other hand, did know some letters and sounds. Why couldn't she read?

The answer, I feel, is the best kept secret in most primary school classrooms today.

Reading, above all, is supposed to make sense.

(NSW Reading K-12 Curriculum Policy Statement, p.5)

Teachers don't tell this to their children often enough and are prepared to let them read nonsense. They do not show them what to do when they come to a word they don't know, and so the children resort to 'sounding out'.

Three in one

Current reading theory (see PEN 55) views reading as a combination of cueing systems that develop an interactive process between the reader and the author. These cueing systems are semantic, syntactic and grapho-phonetic. Unfortunately many teachers have interpreted this as an either/or situation, believing that if they are using any one of these cueing systems they are in step with current thinking and research. Many teachers heavily committed to the phonics approach, on seeing the word grapho-phonics in the explanation of psycholinguistic reading theory, have been convinced that they were on target. Sadly they were wrong. Current reading theory does not present reading as a three-pronged or three-part set of skills. It envisions not three types of reading heading in three different directions, but three interdependent portions of a whole, at the centre of which is meaning. Each is dependent on the other, together constituting what we understand to be reading.

Grapho-phonics

Let us look at the most abused cueing system, grapho-phonics. What is grapho-phonics and why can't we learn to read by learning to sound words out?

To begin with, there is no necessary connection between grapho-phonics and sounding out. Grapho-phonics involves the selection of vital letters and letter clusters in order to confirm the predictions the reader has already made on the basis of syntactic and semantic knowledge. Not every letter is of equal importance, as activities later in this article will demonstrate.

Phonics, on the other hand, has to do with pronouncing the sound that every letter or letter cluster supposedly represents. Reading is concerned with meaning, not pronouncing. No sound need be produced when we read, so why do we put so much emphasis on sounding out? If we only require some of the letters on the page, why put so much emphasis on every single sound? There is a need, however, for children to be acquainted with the individual letter names. Notice I said 'acquainted with,' not 'drilled in.' The majority of children will have already acquired this skill before coming to school, but teachers should include alphabet awareness activities in the class program.

Sound and meaning

Can you read this sentence?

The bouy tolled hymn that he must knot be seen hear inn hour rheum.

Although most people would have little difficulty in reading this, they would experience some disturbance. Yet it is not the sound of the sentence that disturbs, but the conflict between the spelling and the meaning. Meaning, as the sentence shows, is directly related to spelling, not to sound. Indeed many words cannot be pronounced unless you know their meaning, e.g.

read, tear, bow, wind.

And many sounds cannot be pronounced unless you know the word in the first place. For example, the pronunciation of 'sh' in *bishop* and *mishap* or the 'th' in *father* and *fathead* is not possible unless you already know the meaning of the words. Phonics in fact only works when you know what the word is likely to be. Phonics is used to confirm not to predict. In addition, meaning has to be identified before intonation can be worked out. For example, the only way you can tell where to put the stress in these words is by looking at their meaning:

convict suspect.

Many teachers feel that children need to learn the phonic rules in order to be good readers and spellers. What they do not realize is that there are over 166 phonic rules and over 45 exceptions to these rules. Even if you do know the rule, you still have to check the word in case it is one of the exceptions. Relying on phonics and phonic rules creates a handicap for beginning readers.

Activity 1

Read the following lists of words and try to formulate a rule for producing the correct pronunciation of the italicised letters. You will need at least one rule for each of the three sets.

a. hat	hate	b. <i>w</i> rap	<i>w</i> ar	c. car	cent
hatter	hater	<i>w</i> ren	<i>w</i> et	care	cereal
pet	Pete	<i>w</i> ring	<i>w</i> in	coat	cite
petter	Peter	<i>w</i> rong	<i>w</i> on	cough	city
bit	bite			cube	cyclone
bitter	biting			cut	cyst
mop	mope				
cut	cute				
cutter	cuter				

(Weaver 1980, p.39)

Did you notice that the pronunciation of each italicised letter was determined by what followed it? As Verasky put it in *The Structure of English Orthography* (1970), 'A person who attempts to scan left to right, letter by letter, pronouncing as he goes, could not read most English words.' (p.129)

Activity 2

It is possible, of course, that we process each letter separately, whether left to right or not. To test this possibility, try to replicate the following experiment from Edmund Huey's *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, first published in 1908. For this experiment, you will need either a stop watch or a clock with a second hand. Time yourself or someone else reading the column of single letters as rapidly as possible, either simply identifying each letter mentally or pronouncing it aloud. Repeat the same procedure for the column of four-letter words and the column of eight-letter words.

y	pool	analysis
w	rugs	habitual
u	mark	occupied
s	send	inherent
q	list	probable
o	more	summoned
m	pick	devotion
k	stab	remarked
i	neck	overcome
g	your	resolute
e	dice	elements
c	font	conclude
a	earl	numbered
z	whit	struggle
x	ants	division
v	role	research
t	sink	original
r	rust	involved
p	ware	obstacle

(Huey 1968, p.100)

You probably found that it did not take anything like four times as long to read the column of four-letter words as it took to read the column of single letters. Nor, surely, did it take anything like eight times as long to read the column of eight-letter words. Clearly, fluent readers do not process words letter by letter. Just as we do not comprehend sentences merely by combining the meanings of individual words, so we do not perceive words merely by combining the perceptions of individual letters (see Weaver 1980, p.42).

Visual and non-visual information

You do not need to know or to be able to see every word or letter to be able to read. Reading is not simply visual. Everyone when reading uses context or non-visual information. The more non-visual information you have, the less visual information you require and, conversely, the less non-visual information you have, the more visual information you need. If you are reading a fairy story, your experience tells you that you can expect certain phrases and events which tend to recur in fairy stories.

Likewise if you were reading a text about water, you would expect to see certain words and phrases commonly associated with water.

Activity 3

Some parts of words are more useful than others. Try these next two activities and discover which are the more important, consonants or vowels.

a. Vowels absent

-nc- -p-n- t-m- th-r- w-s- h-nds-m- y--ng
w-lf n-m-d L-b-. L-b- l-v-d w-th h-s m-th-r -nd
f-th-r -t th- -dg- -f d--p, d-rk w--ds, -v-r-
d-- L-b- w-nt t- h-nt -t th- n-rth -dg- -f th-
w--ds, n--r th- l-ttl- v-ll-g- -f C-l--s.

b. Consonants absent

-o-e-i-e- a-- -o-o -ou-- -i-- -a- a -i-e-e- o--
-a--e- o- -i- -i-e-, -o--i-- i- --e- -ie--e- -ea-
--e- -oo-- o- -i--i-- -e--ie- i- --e- --i--e-. A-
o--e- -i-e-, -o-o -i-- -e- -u--y-e-ou-- -o -i-- a
--u-- , -ui-y -i-- --a- -a- -i-o-ey-e- i-- -a-e--
a-- ---aye- -oo -a- --o- -o-e.

(Weaver 1980, p.46)

It should be evident by now that consonants are more important than vowels. You don't, in fact, need the vowels nearly so much in order to be able to read. Then why is so much time spent on listening to and deciphering the various vowel sounds?

Activity 4

Try these next two activities and discover which part of the word seems more important.

a. Bottoms absent

One day as Iobo was skirting the edge of the forest he came upon a little girl in a red hood. Her cheeks were so rosy and her arms so nubby that Iobo knew she would be delicious. 'Where are you going, little girl?' he asked. 'Oh,' she replied, 'I'm taking this basket of goodies to my grandmother on the other side of the woods. Grandma isn't feeling very well.'

b. Tops absent

LOBO THOUGHT FOR A MOMENT. HE COULD HARDLY WAIT TO DEVOUR THIS DELICIOUS CHILD, BUT THEN AGAIN HE WAS HUNGRY ENOUGH TO EAT THE GRANDMOTHER TOO. 'WHICH HOUSE DOES YOUR GRANDMOTHER LIVE IN?' ASKED THE BOY. 'IN THE HOUSE BY THE WHITE OAK TREES,' SAID THE GIRL, SMILING A SMILE (BUT THAT IS WHAT SHE NEEDS CAUSE). 'OH, BY THE WAY, ARE YOU HUNGRY?'

(Weaver 1980, p.47)

'Bottoms absent' is easier to read because there are more clues given by capital and ascending letters. Again, you do not need to be able to see the entire word in order to be able to read it. And in the following sentence you

do not even need to see part of the last word in order to establish meaning.

Jimmy put on his pyjamas and jumped into _____.

Whether the word is there or not does not really matter because our non-visual information tells us that the word should be 'bed'.

Words can also be identified under conditions which make it impossible to identify the individual letters: for example, when words are too far away from the eyes' fixation point, or when the light is too poor to permit recognition of individual letters.

Activity 5

Look at the following example briefly. Just one glance at it.

ADKRNEITNDJFKER

Write down all the letters you can remember from this sequence.

At the most you probably got five or six. Now do the same with these letters. Remember, only one glance.

WORK ANIMAL BRIDGE CATERPILLAR
AEROPLANE

How did you do this time? Now try this one.

THE CHERRIES MUST BE PICKED BEFORE
SPRING.

That was better, wasn't it?

There is a limit to how much you can see at a glance, but this is extended if what you are looking at is meaningful. Edmund Huey's conclusion still serves to summarize much of what is known about word perception.

Even in the more pronounced cases of letter consciousness... it is perfectly certain that words are not perceived by a successive recognition of letter after letter, or even by simultaneous recognition of all the letters as such. By whatever cues the recognition may be set off, it is certainly a recognition of word-wholes, except when these recognition units are subsumed under the recognition of a still larger unit. The only question is as to what parts are especially operative as cues in setting off this recognition.

(Huey 1968, pp.111-12)

Short-term and long-term memory

Memory, we would all agree, plays an important part in our life, and most of us are familiar with the distinction between short-term and long-term memory. Our short-term memory can hold five to nine chunks of information at one time. As it accepts more chunks, the information already held is either lost or reduced into larger units for processing into the long-term memory. This processing requires that the larger units be meaningful.

We have already seen how we can identify a word almost as quickly as we can identify one sound. During a normal eye fixation of about one fourth of a second we can identify about 4 or 5 unrelated letters or about 10 to 12 letters organized into two or three unrelated words or 20 to 25 letters organized into four or five related words.

Activity 6

Read the following series of numbers — perhaps it is someone's telephone number. Read it just once.

7420198

Cover it up. Now write your own phone number down. Now, without looking, write the numbers you have just read above.

Could you remember all of these in order? Most of us couldn't. This is exactly what happens when a child sounds out an unknown word and then goes on to the next word and sounds that out. The short-term memory loses the words because they cannot be reduced into meaningful units and processed into the long-term memory. It is impossible for children to maintain meaning under these circumstances. In addition, the length of time taken to read a piece by sounding out each word means that much of the context of the story will be forgotten before the end is reached. Remember — 'Reading, above all, is supposed to make sense.' It is bringing meaning to and extracting meaning from print. Reading is comprehension.

Activity 7

Children can often read words in context which they cannot read in an isolated list. This applies particularly to beginning or non-proficient readers. So choose from your class either a beginning reader (late Year 1 or early Year 2) or a non-proficient reader of any age. Select a story appropriate for this reader. Choose from the story either different function words or about every fifth word and make a list of them, avoiding duplications. Have the reader read the list and then the entire story. Tape-record the reading so that comparisons can be made afterwards. Consider the following:

- Did the reader read in context any words that were missed in isolation?
- Did the reader read in isolation any words that were missed in context?
- On the whole would you consider that words are easier to read in isolation or in context?

For further examples, consult Weaver (1980, p.73).

Syntactic cueing system

As can be seen in the previous activity, readers seem to use context to predict what is coming next. To be able to

do this they use their semantic (meaning derived from background knowledge) and syntactic (flow of language) cueing systems.

To demonstrate that you as a typical reader use syntactic cues like word endings, function words and word order, consider this list of nonsense words:

Bloopy	mult	zoll
corp	klom	ork
Glit	Sil	parfy
flof	naff	

What can you tell about the meaning of these words? Probably only that those words with capitals are names — other than that no meaning can be extracted at all.

Now read the passage below.

BLOOPY AND GLIT

Bloopy is a corp.
 Glit is a flof.
 Bloopy mults like Glit.
 Bloopy and Glit are kloms.
 Sil had naffed Glit to a zoll.
 But he had not naffed Bloopy.
 'The zoll is for flofs,'
 Sil orked to Bloopy.
 'You are a corp.'
 Bloopy was not parfy.
 Then Glit was not parfy.

(Weaver 1980, p.93)

This story represents, in the extreme, the problem readers meet when they encounter words they have never seen before. Yet there seems to be some sense in it. In fact there are many cues to the meaning of unknown words, and if we apply our knowledge of English, we can come close to understanding the whole story. Adult readers can use generalisations they have acquired about letters and sounds to say the words in the list, but that is not reading, because no meaning is involved. Reading is not reading unless it involves some level of comprehension. Readers, even beginners, engage in the same kinds of process you have just gone through, although not at a conscious level. By the time they start school, children have internalised responses to systems of language cues.

The place of phonics in the classroom

Before I move on to classroom activities, there is one more aspect of phonics I wish to discuss. Many teachers assume that children don't know any phonics on entering Kindergarten and so a strict program must be started at once. Yet by the end of Year 1 in a school which paid only minimal attention to phonics, over 90% of the children knew their initial consonants, as well as many other clusters. (This was ascertained by analysis of the children's process writing).

Though not conclusive, research done by Jean Piaget strongly suggests that children experiencing difficulty in reading are at the pre-operational stage. Such children are unable to attend to more than one aspect at once. They are also unable to reverse in their thinking — that is, they are unable to think back to how something was before it was perceptually changed, and so they do not understand how to get from one process to another. They cannot conserve either. These points affect them in the following ways.

(a) They cannot understand that 'A' and 'a' are the same, or that one letter can represent a whole class of sounds. Imagine the difficulty experienced by these children when faced with 'a' in the following words: 'at', 'ate', 'arm', 'above', 'any'.

(b) They cannot match written words with spoken words — not to mention letters with letter names and/or sounds. This is very evident in the early stages of process writing when the children run out of writing before they finish their oral stories.

Although this is a convenient over-simplification of the theory, I am sure that many children are simply not ready for phonics. They cannot hear or apply the sounds and letters. I believe that an awareness program is all that is needed for phonics. There should be a greater emphasis on establishing strategies to enable the children to use the more natural syntactic and semantic cueing systems. If this is done satisfactorily, the grapho-phonetic cueing system will fall into place.

Phonic awareness activities

Whatever activities you do, remember *never treat words or sounds in isolation*. Always have plenty of books available as well as plenty of letter and sound charts for reference. Ensure the children have opportunities to use this material and that they know how to use it.

Word banks in the normal sense are a waste of time, particularly for beginning or hesitant readers, who are simply confused when they see a great number of words all starting with the same letter or all about the same topic. It is far better to transcribe poems which have been read in class onto large sheets of cardboard and display them in an accessible place. You will find that children can locate the words they need because they are in context. Songs, of course, can be treated in the same way.

Phonic Sentences

For raising awareness of the sound 's', for example, write 'Tom saw a snake' on the board. Discuss the sentence and read it together. Ask the children to replace 'snake' with something else Tom might see that starts with the same sound, e.g.

Tom saw a snail
 Tom saw a see-saw.

Board Stories

Let the children see you writing a story either on the board or on the overhead projector. Once the story is written, play such games as 'word detective' with them. Ask them to be good detectives and find all the words that begin or end with a particular sound or letter.

Cloze

Such cloze activities as Nursery Rhyme cloze, progressive and regressive cloze (Johnson & Louis 1985, p.26) can be used. PEN 43 gives many more examples of different types of cloze.

Who Am I?

Beginning readers particularly enjoy this activity. Write a 'Who (or what) am I?' puzzle on the board or overhead projector, e.g.

I'm brown
I'm round
I begin with 'c'
I'm a chocolate cake.

As you write each line, ask the children to predict what the answer might be. As the puzzle is continued they accept or reject their previous decisions, until the final line is written and the answer is confirmed. Children also like to make up their own puzzles for this type of activity.

Shared Story

In its original form researched by Don Holdaway, Shared Story incorporates several strategies as it moves through its four set steps. An awareness program of phonics may aptly be introduced during the first two of these steps.

Step 1 WARM-UP

The warm-up consists of the children and the teacher reading well-known poems or songs either from their big books or from class material that has been written up on large sheets of paper. Phonic innovations can be explored with these poems and songs in the following way. Take for example a traditional rhyme:

To market, to market to buy a fat pig.
Home again, home again jiggety jig.

A phonic innovation can be made on the words 'jiggety jig'. The children select a letter or sound to replace the 'j' in these words. Ensure that the actual letter replaces the 'j' visually as well as orally. The children can then read the rhyme with the new letter/sound replacement.

Step 2 OLD FAVOURITE

During this step a previously treated big book is revisited. As the children are familiar with the story, many activities can be developed. Read the story through together and then play some of the following games.

Phonic innovation. The procedure is similar to that used in Step 1. For example, in the story of Hairy Bear there are recurring patterns, one of which is 'I'll fim — fam — fight 'em'. The letter 'b' could be substituted for the 'f' or rhyming sound could be substituted for the 'im' and 'am'.

Families. This requires the children to find words with similar beginnings, endings, etc. from the text.

Superman. Cover a word in the story ('Post-it' tape is good for this) and ask the children to 'read' the story and use their X-ray vision, like Superman, to look right through the covering and tell you what the word is. Check first of all that the suggested word makes sense and then reveal the word one letter or letter cluster at a time. Of course exactly the same word may not have been used. This is an ideal time to demonstrate to the children that making sense is of primary importance.

These are just some of the phonic awareness activities that can be done. It must be emphasised that you would require only one of these activities per session, and that such an activity should take only one or two minutes at the most.

Children need to be able to practise the ideas you are demonstrating to them. What better way to do this than to encourage them in their writing? Make sure the children read their stories and other pieces to you and at times see you write a dictated story for them. This gives them a purpose to use the language you have given them access to.

Remember — always keep the letters in the context of the word and always keep the word in the context of the sentence.

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PO Box 167 Rozelle NSW 2039